

By John Fritze, The Baltimore Sun

WASHINGTON —

When Kathleen Thompson learned this week that her Forest Glen engineering firm would not receive payment from its biggest client, the Federal Aviation Administration, the decision she had been dreading suddenly became inevitable: She told employees that some will be furloughed.

"I can't keep them on because I can't get paid by the FAA," said Thompson, president of Jerry Thompson & Associates, which specializes in air traffic control and receives 80 percent of its business from the agency. "A lot of them ... have kids in college. A whole month's salary is not easy" to lose.

A day after Congress settled a lengthy debate over the nation's debt ceiling, lawmakers are wrangling over a less-noticed standoff also caused by partisan gridlock: the partial shutdown of the FAA, which has left 74,000 government and contract workers furloughed nationwide.

Though less than two weeks old, the shutdown is having an impact in Maryland. In addition to an unknown number of Maryland-based contract workers who are out of a job, the U.S. Department of Transportation issued stop-work orders for six projects in the state, including a new radar system at Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport that helps manage traffic on runways and taxiways. Seven FAA employees in Maryland have been furloughed.

Airport and transportation officials have stressed that the shutdown, which began July 23, will not affect passenger safety because essential employees such as air traffic controllers are still drawing a paycheck. But given the unstable economic climate, businesses with ties to the government say it was an unfortunate time for Congress to put people out of work.

During a news conference Wednesday on Capitol Hill, Rep. Steny H. Hoyer of Southern Maryland and other Democratic leaders blamed House Republicans for the gridlock and said Congress, now in summer recess, should return to Washington to pass a short-term funding bill. The FAA has been limping along for four years on 20 such short-term extensions.

"We need to get this done, and we should get it done today," said Hoyer, the No. 2 Democrat in the House.

The partisan bickering in Congress that led to the shutdown has been just as antagonistic — if less prominent — as the monthslong debate over raising the debt ceiling, which was resolved

with last-minute legislation Tuesday. The Republican-led House approved an FAA bill last month that would have kept the agency funded through Sept. 16. Senate Democrats balked, in part because the bill includes \$14 million in cuts in federal subsidies for rural airports.

Democrats say Republicans are also forcing a debate over bargaining rights because they oppose a new government regulation that reduces the number of airline employees needed to approve unionization. Democrats said Wednesday that the GOP effort to block the new rule is intended to help Delta Airlines, where previous unionization efforts have failed.

Republicans counter that the Democratic-led Senate should have taken up the House-passed funding extension or passed its own version. In a statement Wednesday, House Speaker John A. Boehner said Democrats are playing politics with the issue.

"I respect the fact that senators have certain objections, but they have had two weeks to respond to the House bill and have done nothing, leaving tens of thousands of workers in limbo," the Ohio Republican said. "The House has done its job and now it's time for senators to do theirs."

Though Congress is in recess until after Labor Day, both chambers technically continue to meet in pro forma sessions. That could enable legislative leaders to negotiate and pass a short-term extension as long as no lawmaker objects. Other options include calling members back to Washington or allowing the furloughs to continue until Congress reconvenes next month.

As the two sides bickered Wednesday, federal contractors in Maryland held their breath.

Thompson said she will be forced to furlough about 15 of her 40 employees starting Monday for as long as the impasse continues. She made the decision after learning this week that the FAA would be unable to pay its current bills and would delay payment on work performed as far back as June.

Meanwhile, Greenbelt-based Applied Integrated Technologies had to stop work on a \$3.5 million contract for new air traffic control software. Tom Ockuly, the company's chief operating officer, expressed concern that his company might have to reduce staff if the shutdown continues. He said the FAA changed course after initially telling his company it could continue the work.

"We can probably hold out for a month if they act quickly when they get back in September," said Ockuly, whose company employs 100 people, mostly in Maryland.

The partial FAA shutdown will have no immediate impact at BWI, though the stop-work orders include a \$2.3 million contract for site preparation for the new radar system and a \$91,500 contract for security. The contractors, both based out of state, did not respond to requests for comment Wednesday.

The airport's executive director, Paul Wiedefeld, said he is concerned that the political stalemate could create a bottleneck for paperwork required for future construction projects. For

instance, the airport is preparing to start a project to expand buffer zones around runways. Environmental and design reviews, many of which require FAA approval, are under way.

The longer that federal employees are not around to review those documents, he fears, the longer the backlog will be when they do come back to work.

"That starts to impact the construction season," Wiedefeld said. "We need this stuff lined up."

The outcome of the debate could also have an impact on Hagerstown Regional Airport, one of about 150 rural airports that benefit from federal subsidies through the Essential Air Service program. Created as part of airline deregulation in 1978, the program has become controversial as its cost has increased. Congress spent \$200 million on the subsidies last year, according to the Government Accountability Office, the body's investigative arm.

Rep. Roscoe G. Bartlett, a Republican whose district includes Hagerstown, could not be reached for comment.

The shutdown, meanwhile, is costing the government about \$30 million a day in taxes on airline tickets it can no longer collect. The FAA lost its legal authority to collect the taxes when the last short-term funding extension expired.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, a former Republican House member from Illinois, has used recent public events to press Congress to act. At the White House, LaHood argued Wednesday that the speeches lawmakers have given on job creation "ring hollow" since members of both parties left Washington without addressing the thousands who are out of work.

"End your vacation for a couple days. Get off the beach. Get out of your mobile homes or whatever you're traveling in," LaHood said. "Come back to Washington. Pass a bill."